

Cracking

by
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A blinding brightness on a sunny day, the kind of sunlight you want to crack like a too white egg. I always buy brown eggs, unless I'm dying them. I'm dying and my children don't want to believe me.

I wait on the porch for the buses to come. November, the sun not quite yellowing as it lowers early, an unseasonable warmth. Indian summer. Ha. I wish for a satisfying nip in the air even as I am bundled up against the chill in my bones, a hat to cover the bare patches, the ugliness – leukemia. My son jumps down out of the screech and clank, picks up the stray ball as if he's not aware he's doing so, shoots a hoop. Barely audible "hey" as he brushes past me, swinging the screen door too wide so it slams behind him. Clank.

From inside, I hear the refrigerator open and close, a cabinet, a drawer. The spoon hits the counter. He's opening the ice cream, spooning it into a bowl. Will he miss me or that there is ice cream in the freezer when he gets home from school? His feet are twice the size of mine. Every floorboard creaks, every stair. Door shuts, Eminem on. I won't see him again until dinner. Small pleasures, dosed out. I love him, though I barely exist for him. Start to feel the knot in my throat. Here comes my daughter's bus.

Jackie laughs back to her friends then turns to find me on the porch. Head down, arms cross across her books, her chest, as if she were suddenly taken chill. There is no breeze. She is afraid of my changes. Less the missing hair, faded skin, and thinness, it's because I try to drink her in. I stare too much – watery. I stand too close so I can smell her under her shampoo, conditioner, perfume. She gave me *Happy!* for my birthday last month. I smell it on her. I never wear it. I tried once, but the citrusy sweetness fell brittle and fake on the back of my tongue – metallic, like the hospital.

I have become a series of vignettes, no longer a life. I smell my daughter as she passes. She glances at me, afraid one of us might cry. “Hey” slips out from between her lips, like a feather. I won't cry. She opens the screen door slowly, slides in, her hand behind her, so the door clicks shut. Finally, a breeze passes, slight rustle in the leaves. Goldie's tail wisps on the porch floor. She raises her old gray snout to me. *Time to go in?* The only one here who looks me in the eye - Golden Retriever balefulness. She's old and smells it. Comforting. We go in. She follows me from room to room. She is the only one preparing for my passing. Smart old bitch. Wish I had as much sense.

Dinner, it should happen in a couple of hours. Jackie is watching TV in the sunroom. She has a tendency to look out the window at the sky. Even when she was little, she noted how the moon follows us every time we're in the car

after dark. November. I can see from the kitchen, Jackie eyeing the moon. It's not dark yet. She pulls the throw blanket over her as the sun dips below the trees and house line, covers her in shadow. If Egon Scheile painted cozy, this is how he'd have painted Jackie, all blue and gray. He'd have painted me naked, wasted angles of bones. He liked my sort of angst. Gestalt.

I don't feel like making dinner. I feel like making breakfast – a good old-fashioned Sunday morning thing: Biscuits, butter, bacon, eggs and grits. Mounds of scrambled eggs. I haven't kept bacon in the house since the kids were little and their father had that heart attack. He deserved it. At least it woke him up. Weekends at their father's house are holidays. At least now he appreciates them. I won't be able to for much longer. I think they'll appreciate me after I'm gone. If I could read their minds now, maybe I would see they do, but in that way of the popsicle disappearing, already stung with regret.

David is stomping a size thirteen right over my head to the music. Last year I would have broom handled the ceiling. Now I love the irritation, evidence of my son. I have to go to the store, buy some bacon. Maybe the kids will join me. I've been indulgent with junk food of late. I promise myself to let them pick out whatever they want. Before they were teenagers, I gave them a good base to know what a balanced meal looks like: a protein, a carbohydrate, a little green and yellow or orange. Now that Jackie's thirteen and David is sixteen, I let them

think they're getting one over on me nutritionally. Lately, I've had a weakness for Twinkies and Yodels myself. Hell, I can live...a little.

I take my keys off the hook in the kitchen. Call out, "Jackie, I'm going to the store. Want anything? Wanna come?"

She hesitates, thinks about what new junk food she wants, the pretend good for you kind. Trix neon yogurt snacks are her current favorite. She's partial to sugar, especially hard candies, butterscotch. She likes to suck, tongue-snap it before she crunches it vertically.

"K." she says.

"Will you go ask David if he wants to join us?"

I get the eye roll, but she goes, trudges up the stairs, bangs hard on his door, yells over the music, "David! Da-vid! C'mon! We're going to the store!" Chair scratches floor, thump. Stereo off.

"Chill it, dogbreath. I'm comin'!" He takes the stairs two at a time, tries to run down Jackie. He's laughing at the sport of it and how it gets her every time.

"Cut it out! Stop pushing!" Ah, the joys of motherhood. I momentarily rethink my impulse to have them join me. This too shall pass. I roll my eyes. Evidence where Jackie got it from, remind myself that I love them even now. I want all of them, even this. It matters.

When they reach the kitchen, I toss the keys to David. Neither of us needs to say a word. He catches them, not a flinch. Basketball. He got his license on his birthday, July fifth, the aftermath of fireworks. I could hear them exploding all the way through labor.

“No! I don’t want to ride with him driving! We’ll all die!” We laugh it off after she realizes what she said and its immanent implications. If we don’t all laugh, we’ll crack.

I glance over at David at the wheel, trying not to seem obvious. Every moment is clichéd as I now drink him in. But there he is, that permanent quirky grin creasing the dimple in his right cheek. That dimple, that corner of his mouth dipping into his cheek. I press this into memory. Scrapbook it for the afterlife.

“What?” He accuses me with a syllable.

“Nothing.” Refrain from gushing which will only worsen the time that’s left.

At the store without incident, we systematically go up one aisle then down the next. David loads the cart with everything salty that catches his eye, three different bags of chips, microwave popcorn, a can of artichoke hearts. I didn’t know he liked artichokes. Hated them when he was seven.

Judiciously, Jackie picks pre-packed two-toned puddings, a selection of Brach's candies by the pound, Trix yogurts with sprinkle in crap. Two distinct routes in the frozen dinner aisle: Hungry Man and Lean Cuisines. I don't cook very often now.

I almost forget the bacon. Both look at me, then the bacon in my hand, and don't say a thing. Shrug their shoulders at each other. I will be glad to clog my arteries tonight. I start to feel tired by the time we reach the registers. David takes over pushing the cart at the first sign of my pace slowing, breath deepening. Evidence he pays attention. Jackie looks at magazines. "Can I get Teen People?" Ashton Kutcher is on the cover.

"Hmm-Hmm." David pretends not to be embarrassed. Raises his thumb at her to his friend Jason working the register. Get-a-load-of-this look shot to Jason.

"Hey."

"Hey." Too cool for words, need for camaraderie.

Jackie blushes, says, "Hi, Jase." Both boys roll their eyes, but I think Jason likes it, that she has a crush on him. I fast forward to their wedding I won't be around for, then shake it out of my mind.

We all load the groceries into the back of the van I swore I would never buy when I was their age, but have come to depend upon. Will Jackie be able to

depend upon David? He will never be overt about it, but I suspect, in the little ways he takes up when I tire out, that he will be her ice cream in the freezer.

At home again, David brings in the groceries from the van. Jackie turns on the kitchen light and starts to put things away. I turn on the burners, start laying the bacon in the widest pan. Goldie creeps over to lie in front of the stove, now warmer than her dog bed in the corner. Tired as I am, I start cracking eggs. Though the sun is now completely gone, there is hope and love in these small moments. My children are helping. I needn't have asked.